JOHN DEE AND EARLY MODERN OCCULT PHILOSOPHY

GYÖRGY E. SZŐNYI

Deborah Harkness, *Talking with Angels. John Dee and the End of Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. pp. xiii+252 with 7 illustrations (ISBN 0 521 62228 X).
Urszula Szulakowska, *The Alchemy of Light. Geometry and Optics in Late Renaissance Alchemical Illustration.* Leiden: Brill, 2000 (Symbola & Emblemata 10). pp. xxii+246 with 50 illustrations (ISBN 90 04 11690 7).
Håkan Håkansson, *Seeing the Word. John Dee and Renaissance Occultism*. Lund: Lunds Universitet, 2001 (Minervaserien 2). pp. 373 with 37 illustrations (ISBN91-974153-0-8).
Benjamin Woolley, *The Queen's Conjurer. The Science and Magic of Dr. John Dee, Adviser to Queen Elizabeth I.* New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001. pp. xii+355, with maps and illustrations (ISBN 0-8050-6509-1).

John Dee has always been a favorite character of English Renaissance research. The books already devoted to his career and achievements would now fill quite a few bookshelves. One could even speak of the rise of a John Dee "industry" which organizes specialized conferences and runs professional newsletters. The reasons for the interest in Dee are manifold. To begin with, he was a truly versatile Renaissance character whose interests embraced all the major territories of 16th-century science, from "hard-core" mathematics through geography and history to the dark terrain of occultism, magic and spiritualism. He was also an important background-figure of the Elizabethan court, a protégé of the Queen; and as such he was entrusted to choose the astrologically best fitting day for the coronation in 1558. Dee had excellent contacts with the greatest politicians and courtiers of his day, such as Leicester, Walsingham, Raleigh**;** and he tried to bring himself in a position of having his say in political plans and exploration projects. Therefore, his activities could not escape the attention of scholars belonging to various fields of historical research, from the history of politics to the history of science, as well as mathematics, geography and antiquarianism.

Not surprisingly, a man with such wideranging scholarly interests was also a passionate collector of books. He gathered a library of about four thousand volumes, including many valuable manuscripts. Some of its books (a number of which are annotated by himself) and some catalogues have survived, but for the most part its holdings were eventually scattered. It still remains that, judging from what can be reconstructed with regard to its contents, this library appears to be one of the most interesting testimonies to English intellectual life

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in the 16th century. As such, it is of the utmost importance for the study of early modern esoterism as well.

Another reason for Dee's popularity as a research subject is due to the fact that besides his published works he left behind an amazing amount of personal documents – correspondence, personal diaries and extended spiritual journals – which not only bear witness to some arresting aspects of his career, but enable us also to assess the complexity of this multifaceted personality of the late Renaissance.

We have not yet mentioned the "dark side" of Dee. But this aspect also has triggered the interest of many scholars, and of enthusiasts as well. In the middle of his career a strange, although not unprecedented turn took place in the distinguished Doctor's life. Having lost his faith and confidence in the human sciences he turned to a bizarre magical practice, upon which he bestowed the name "angelic conversations". To sum up his aim in one sentence: since he could no longer believe that human science might ever prove able to provide a complete understanding of the divinely ordained universe, he concluded that one should learn the ultimate truths from superhuman beings, the angels. Being able to carry on conversations with the angels requires, though, that one learns their language. This became Dee's goal, which moved him for more than thirty years to conjure up celestial beings daily in the endless sessions of his so-called "Enochian magic", in order to learn their language and be able to ask them about the greatest mysteries of Creation.

The above brief summary exhibits a versatile and adaptable character who has been attracting interest in various fields of curiosity and research. But if we look at the historiography of Dee studies, we see that the focal points of scholarly interest have been very different, somehow always converging with the principles of historical evaluation dominant in any period. The problem with most books and studies about Dee has been that he was treated as an emblem of this or that movement, intellectual trend, or cultural occurrence. At different times Dee has been labelled a leading Elizabethan spy, one of the founding fathers of English natural science, a charlatan alchemist, a great enthusiast, a hermetic philosopher, and so on. Of course this has resulted in a distortion of the overall picture, because to a certain extent Dee embodied all of these occupations and attitudes.

In his time John Dee was a respected scholar, and although he was sometimes accused of being a "conjuror", even half a century after his death he was still remembered as 'the wise doctor'. The publication of his spiritual diaries by Meric Casaubon in 1659, however, especially in the light of the distrustful preface of the editor, gradually undermined his reputation; and by the time of the Enlightenment he had come to be considered (if he was given attention at

all) as a credulous and deluded philosopher who had lost his way among the manipulations of his charlatan medium, the alchemist Edward Kelly.

During the 19th century, some historians unearthed his diaries and letters, and published them in the context of a positivist historical reconstruction of the Elisabethan age. It was not until 1909 that the first relatively accurate and correct biography on Dee appeared, by Charlotte Fell Smith. At that time, the history of science was characterized by a teleological approach, so that only those "achievements" were acknowledged which were seen as pointing toward future scientific developments while everything else was dismissed as a failure or dead end. Given such a mentality, the safest domain for assessing Dee's scholarship was geography. Thus he earned an important place in E.G.R. Taylor's *Tudor Geography* (1930) and some generous mentions in F.R. Johnson's *Astronomical Thought in Renaissance England* (1937), especially as someone who in his *Mathematicall Preface...* had made useful contributions to the creation of a native scientific vocabulary.

The situation greatly changed by the middle of the century, when, especially due to the research of the Warburg school (Franz Saxl, Paul Oskar Kristeller, Erwin Panofsky, Edgar Wind), a radical reassessment of the intellectual climate of the Renaissance arose. This new approach acknowledged the importance of the magical world picture in the "antechamber of the Enlightenment". The scholars working on this interpretation focused primarily on the neoplatonic revival of Ficino's Florentine Academy and its influence all over Europe in the first half of the 16th century and after. A typical fruit of this approach was D. P. Walker's monograph, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (1958) which traced the development of neoplatonic magic in the careers of Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Agrippa, Bruno and others. Walker's famous colleague, Dame Frances Yates, became the champion of this trend of research. If one tries to summarise her "theses" in a few sentences, the following aspects stand out. According to Yates, the most important philosophical innovation of the period had been that it had redefined man's place in the universe. Following the footsteps of Cassirer, Kristeller, and others, Yates came to the conclusion that the neoplatonic philosophers of the Renaissance developed the idea of man's dignity not only from the works of Plato and the Hellenistic neoplatonists, but also – in fact, primarily – from the hermetic texts attributed to the "thrice great" Hermes Trismegistus. The Yates thesis also implied that the Renaissance magus was a direct predecessor of the natural scientist because, as the *Corpus hermeticum* suggested, the magus could regain the superior standing that the first man had lost with the Fall. For a while these ideas seemed to revolutionize scholarly understanding of the early modern age and the birth of modern science. In such a context, the magical ideas which had

previously been discarded by intellectual historians now appeared as important ingredients of the human ambition to understand and conquer nature.

The changing concepts of Renaissance research influenced the appreciation of John Dee, too. Already in 1952, the historian I. R. F. Calder wrote a Ph.D. dissertation in which he contextualized Dee's magic as grounded in a neoplatonist theory. Although this thesis remained unpublished (today it is available on the internet), it inspired Frances Yates to include Dee as a key figure in her narrative of the neoplatonic-hermetic magical Renaissance; and in fact Dee featured as a favorite character in all of her later books (*Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 1964; *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, 1972; *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, 1979). As a final outcome of this trend, Peter French, a student of Frances Yates, wrote a full size monograph (1972) entirely devoted to Dee in which he interpreted the English doctor as a "Renaissance magus".

No matter how convincing the Yates thesis appeared and how eloquently it was presented by its author, by the mid-1970s critical opinions could also be heard. The debate included questions of philological accuracy; for example, scholars could not agree to what extent the hermetic texts had influenced the magi of the sixteenth century, or to what extent Frances Yates' conjectures about humanistic and secret-political links between certain English intellectuals and the German Rosicrucians could be validated. Also, the theoretical framework of intellectual history came to be challenged at that time; and this may have been of particular importance with respect to the emergence of a new interpretation of John Dee.

It was Nicholas Clulee who, in 1988, published a bulky study with the aim of displaying the wide spectrum of influences and programs at work during the career of the Doctor (*John Dee's Natural Philosophy: Between Science and Religion*). Clulee rebuked the philosophy of the Warburg/Yates school as follows:

> what is common to these works is that all approach Dee as a problem of finding the correct intellectual tradition into which he appears to fit, both as a way of making sense of his disparate and often difficult to understand works and activities and as a way of establishing his importance by associating him with an intellectual context of recognized importance for sixteenth-century and later intellectual developments (p. 3).

In his own presentation he managed to establish a dynamic picture as opposed to the previously static image of the hermetic magus. Clulee differentiated among various periods in Dee's career between which his intellectual outlook as well as the direction of his attention changed. He particularly emphasized the medieval origins, including al-Kindi and Roger Bacon, at the foundation of

Dee's magical experiments. The importance of Yates' and French's interpretations lay in the recognition of magic as worthy of investigation in the context of the history of science, i.e. in the fact that they had legitimized a preoccupation which had previously been considered mere obscurantism. Building on this, Clulee highlighted the diachronic reorientation during Dee's career and brought into the discussion the medieval roots of sixteenth-century magic and science, which had been overshadowed by the Yatesian enthusiasm for neoplatonic hermeticism.

The following stage in the changing interpretation of Dee was heralded by William Sherman's monograph *The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance* (1995), in which the author revealed a synchronic multiplicity in Dee's diverse interests and activities. If we consider the above development of historiographical inquiry, we thus see how research has been moving from a somewhat static and simplistic interpretation of "Dee as an English magus" toward a more complex contextualization in intellectual history, in which elements of discontinuity have become emphasized and in which the originally proposed "master narrative" has become subverted by more and more – often conflicting and contradictory – subtexts.

How should we see Dee today? The straightforward science-historical approach seems unsatisfactory, since magic as a complex human endeavour has had many aspects without a direct connection to science and embracing, rather, the territories of religion and psychology. On the other hand, one should not make the contrary mistake of assuming that there existed sharp boundaries between scientific, philosophical and religious ideas in the early modern period. Four recent books in which John Dee is a main protagonist provide precisely such complex and syncretic interpretations of his magic and the early modern intellectual scene in general. Thus they are successful efforts to move beyond the exclusive identification of Dee with one or another trend of Renaissance thinking or Renaissance research.

While earlier scholars usually started their discussions with Dee's scientific projects and only later touched upon his more "embarrassing" experiments with scrying (or tactfully neglected them entirely), Deborah Harkness focuses her attention on the conversation with angels and places them in the context of Renaissance kabbalah, alchemy, and eschatological speculation. The novelty of her approach is that she does not explain Dee's magic from the perspective of his science but, rather, examines the Doctor's science from the direction of his magico-religious worldview. In line with recent scholarly opinions (such as those of Christopher Whitby, Stephen Clucas and myself) she argues that there was no cataclysmic gap between the early, "scientific" Dee and the later interviewer of angelic spirits. Rather, these two activities should be seen as differ-

ent manifestations of the same preoccupation: his never-ceasing desire for omniscience through the grace of God. Does this imply a return to the kinds of "grand narratives" that have haunted Dee research in the past, i.e., the attempt to legitimize a closed, homogeneous picture of the subject? I think this is by no means the case. Harkness' study demonstrates the multiple and manifold, often contradictory strains in Dee's thought and practice, and his uniqueness in 16th-century intellectual history. At the same time she is not afraid to point out the connecting links which constitute a *leitmotif* in Dee's career, and which also connect him to the broader cultural context of late-Renaissance Europe.

Of primary importance for this broader cultural context was a sense of intellectual crisis, one aspect of which was that while Nature had previously been seen as a text – the Book of Nature given by God, the exegesis of which would lead to a better understanding of the Creator – by the time of the Renaissance the realization had dawned that this text was corrupt, imprecise, and could not be read properly. According to Harkness' thesis 'the angels gave Dee the exegetical and restorative tools to read, understand, and rectify the Book of Nature' (p. 4).

The first part of the monograph deals with the genesis of Dee's angel magic: it discusses the conversational and communicative qualities of Dee's enterprise and also looks at the interpretive community: how did the people who participated in Dee's angelic conversations – from the Polish king to scryers – perceive the Doctor's experiments? Further chapters in this first part discuss the philosophical foundations of angelology and its relation to natural science. Harkness unfolds these observations in terms of a metaphor which compares Dee's project to building and climbing Jacob's Ladder as a means of attempting direct communication with God and his agents, the angelic spirits.

Putting all this in a European cultural context, Harkness calls attention to many parallel intellectual efforts. Dee's fellow humanists had become similarily frustrated by the realization that intellectual authority – contrary to the Renaissance expectations as manifested in Pico's *Oratio de hominis dignitate* – could not firmly rely on accumulated human wisdom. All kinds of efforts of esoteric scholarship may be seen as efforts to break free from this paradoxical crisis, and one could easily develop an intricate typology of magical scientific programs among Dee's 16th-century contemporaries – from Trithemius, Giorgi and Paracelsus, to Postel, Bruno and Campanella, not to mention the many 17th-century followers, such as Dee's compatriot, Robert Fludd.

Harkness' observations show a strong kinship with earlier scholarly analyses of the late Renaissance intellectual crisis, known as the Mannerism debate. In the 1960s and 1970s both European and American historians spent a great

deal of energy to discuss the nature of this 16th-century intellectual crisis (among the most important contributions, one may mention Gustav René Hocke, *Manierismus in der Literatur*; Arnold Hauser, *Der Ursprung der modernen Kunst und Literatur: Die Entwicklung des Manierismus seit der Krise der Renaissance*; André Chastel, *La crise de la Renaissance*; and Tibor Klaniczay, *Renaissance und Manierismus. Zum Verhältnis von Gesellschafts-struktur, Poetik und Stil*. From the products of this debate, only Nauert's *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought* is cited by Harkness. I think that a reflective review of the literature of Mannerism could have provided her with a more thorough foundation for the book's sometimes hasty generalisations about the European crisis.

The second part of the book deals with the contents of the angelic conversations, which the author discusses under the label "Revelations". The three chapters in this part contextualize Dee's scrying in relation to early modern apocalyptic literature, Christian and Jewish kabbalah, and finally, Renaissance theories of alchemy. According to Harkness these are the three layers, or systems of thought, that make up the complicated texture of the spiritual diaries; and one can only agree with her argumentation. The apocalyptic-Enochian prophecy is all too obvious in Dee's visions, but Harkess also convincingly detects kabbalist and alchemical subtexts. As we know from other studies (especially those dealing with the interpretation of the *Monas hieroglyphica*) Dee was thoroughly preoccupied with the problems of sacred and human language(s) and his studies of the kabbalah were connected with these investigations. Also, he never ceased to be interested in practical alchemy, but it is clear that alchemy primarily occupied him as a symbolic-metaphoric system of revelation. As Harkness argues, inspired by his Paracelsian studies Dee looked at alchemy as an 'angelic medicine'.

When analyzing the imagery of the spiritual diaries, Harkness asserts that it is a close relative of the alchemical emblematics which flourished in medieval manuscripts as well as 17th-century printed emblem books, except that the two dimensional world of the alchemical illustrations is turned in Dee's diaries into scripts of 'chemical theatre', with visual and oral methods of transmission (pp. 205ff.). Dee's ultimate goal was spiritual transformation, but he expressed his religious-philosophical program – like Jakob Boehme and many others – in the hidden symbolism of alchemy.

Although Harkness' new reading of the angelic conversations is not unconvincing, one should remember that alternative readings also exist. While Harkness claims that Dee's occult discourse is an entirely new and innovative synthesis of various Renaissance theories and practices, Stephen Clucas has recently presented important evidence to establish the relationship between

Dee's ritual practice and the medieval Solomonic tradition (see his paper, 'John Dee's *Liber Mysteriorum* and the *ars notoria*' which is also cited in Harkness' book). From Clucas' viewpoint it seems that Dee's final intellectual phase devoted to ceremonial magic was a mere recycling of medieval routines. I would not like to take side between the two parties. Both opinions can be argued for, and – as I recently suggested elsewhere – John Dee was such a versatile and at the same time syncretizing character that one should not be surprised to find parallel or amalgamated trends from seemingly contrary sources in his thought (Szőnyi, 'Ficino's Talismanic Magic and John Dee's Hieroglyphic Monad').

While examining the alchemical subtext of Dee's diaries, Harkness calls attention to the presence of light-symbolism in them. The source of this might have been Pantheus' *Voarchadumia contra alchimiam* (1530) in which one can observe an attempt to unify alchemy and optics. As is known from Nicholas Clulee, Dee was deeply interested in optical theories and studied medieval authorities such as al-Kindi, Grosseteste, and Roger Bacon. These ideas, mixed with theories of Renaissance magic can be found in his scientific treatises, including the *Monas hieroglyphica*, as well.

Although Harkness does not refer to the papers of Urszula Szulakowska, during the past few years that English art historian has been exploring this specific area. She has now synthesized her findings in a complex and highly intriguing book. While *The Alchemy of Light* does not concentrate only on John Dee, the English magus is one of the key characters in it. Szulakowska's thesis is that from the mid-sisteenth to the late-seventeenth century, one of the most important metaphysical concepts in Western Europe was that of the divinity and generative power of light. She argues that this can be seen in the church symbolism of the Baroque Counter-Reformation as well as in the theology of Protestant Pietism. The book examines the historical foundations of this light-symbolism, on the one hand, and its relation to scientific and hermetic-magical theories, on the other. The author's particularly valuable methodological approach is that she treats the whole phenomenon as a particular way of cultural representation and interprets it in a semiotic conceptual frame.

The first chapter explains the characteristics of occult semiotics, emphasizing that previous studies of Renaissance alchemical imagery 'have rarely involved a discussion of its semiotic aspects, yet, without such an analysis it is difficult to establish the exact role of visual illustration within a particular context' (p. 1). Using Peirce's typology of iconic, indexical and symbolic signs, Szulakowska provides a quite complex comparison of visual and verbal expressions of occult notions, suggesting that 'it would yield more profitable results to regard visual and verbal signs as autonomous dialects of the same

language, thus requiring different critical approaches' (p. 3). Since the visual signs deliver information synchronically while verbal texts do it diachronically, she argues that the written text is more dictatorial towards its interpreter than the visual artefact. Without venturing into more intricate details of the age-old *ut pictura poesis* debate, we can safely say that by raising these questions, Szulakowska has opened up new interpretive strategies for the understanding of occult symbolism.

Not only this book's methodology is innovative, but its subject matter as well. No study so far has given such a thorough and at the same time wide-ranging overview of light-symbolism from the Middle Ages until the late seventeenth century. After the theoretical introduction, the historical chapters discuss the impact of geometry and astrology in late medieval alchemy, the influence of medieval optics on Renaissance alchemy, and on Paracelsus in particular. The latter Szulakowska sees as a specific manifestation of hermetic philosophy. The first part of the book focuses on John Dee's "alchemy of light", which the author examines primarily in the *Monas hieroglyphica* and associates with the kabbalah. Dee's other important concept in relation to the subject of this book is his treatment of "Zographie", which is explained in the *Mathematical Preface*. Dee's "Zographie" is a speculative concept suitable for synthatizing the mathematics and geometry of Vitruvius and Alberti with the occult philosophy. Szulakowska's conclusion is that 'the lofty intellectual and spiritual stature awarded by Dee to architecture may have had important consequences for alchemical illustration in the early seventeenth century' (p. 75).

The hero of the second part of the book is Heinrich Khunrath, whose symbolic alchemical illustrations accompanying his *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae* (1595, 1602, 1609) are well known. However, except for Umberto Eco's pioneering study (*Lo strano caso della Hanau, 1609*) Szulakowska is the first scholar to have given careful considerations to the layers of the German mystic's occult symbolism as well as the intricate intellectual contexts of this work. So far, Khunrath has been seen as an occult hermetic philosopher with a wild imagination; but as Szulakowska convincingly argues, he in fact turned away from Renaissance hermeticism because in terms of his Lutheran pietist convictions he found it too pagan and dangerous. As an alternative, he worked out his Christological alchemy, with its geometric- and light-imagery; however, because of his exalted diction and expression he remained an isolated figure.

The last two chapters of this richly illustrated book are devoted to Michael Maier's alchemical geometry of the Sun and Robert Fludd's alchemical interpretation of the Eye of God. Since these chapters are not closely related to

John Dee, their discussion should be left for a different book review. It is worth mentioning, however, that in these chapters the author repeatedly brings up evidence that shows how influential Dee remained for the esoteric writers of the seventeenth century. These pieces of evidence usefully complement the historiographical debate, deriving from the Yates-theses, where much discussion has been devoted to Dee's exact role and influence in the complicated story of Renaissance magic.

Håkan Håkansson's recent book on Dee and Renaissance occultism likewise demonstrates that the Yates theses and theoretical issues in connection with hermeticism cannot be bypassed even today. His book starts with a thought-provoking conceptual introduction ("Understanding early modern occultism. Retrospection and reassessment", pp. 35-73), at the beginning of which the historian situates himself in a system of coordinates opposing but nevertheless anchored to Dame Frances Yates' hypotheses:

> Taking our own ideological framework as providing universal and natural criteria for understanding reality, historians judged occultism by modern standards of "rationality" and "science" and constructed hegemonic accounts of the past – accounts in which the sheer *difference* of the Other was either treated as a mark of inferiority, or suppressed through an act of interpretation that abstracted the aspect most familiar to us and took this as adequately representing the whole of that culture (p. 35-6).

It is almost inevitable that Håkansson's generalizing statement is corroborated by Yates' example, as he adds in a footnote: 'A well-known example of the latter perspective is Frances Yates' account of the "Hermetic Tradition". As such, her account was essentially based on the rhetorical trope of *synecdoche*, in which the part is taken as representing the whole' (*ibid.*). No matter what one thinks of this, nowadays obligatory, academic self-positioning (I, in fact, appreciate it and find it stimulating), one has to acknowledge that the rest of the book is an exemplary work of textual research and source analysis. Håkansson has gone back to a great number of Classical and Renaissance sources which are now largely forgotten but were greatly admired by Dee, and especially those which have survived with the Doctor's marginalia 'Iamblichus' *De mysteriis*, Synesius' *De insomniis*, Jacques Gohory's *De usu et mysterii notarum liber*, Pantheus' *Voarchadumia*, Postel's *De originibus*, Trithemius' *De septem secundeis*, etc.). The author has managed to re-read these texts in a manner that yields a better understanding of the doctor's philosophy and the complexities of early modern occultism. From Håkansson's book one can see the direction Dee studies have taken, as they shifted from a science-historical focus to a greater emphasis on theology and the philosophy of language. The book's chapters – "Symbolic Exegesis, Language, and His-

tory"; "The Language of Symbols"; and "The Language of Magic" – can be read as closely complementary to Deborah Harkness' concepts, but offering more thorough (and at the same time somewhat more down to earth) textual analyses.

One more book deserves mention among the recent publications on Dee. Benjamin Woolley's biography *The Queen's Conjuror* is rather different from the ones treated above, since Mr. Woolley is not a professional intellectual historian and his work is not closely connected to the academic evolution of Dee-studies. In fact, he does not even mention any of the theoretical and methodological debates summarized above. However, Woolley is a professional historical biographer and his book should be welcomed as the first reliable and still imaginatively written portrait of Dee since the publication of Charlotte Fell Smith in 1909. I am not suggesting that Woolley's book is completely even in its treatment of the Doctor's eventful life and versatile activities. As opposed to other biographical summaries, his narrative concentrates on the East-Central European trip of the 1580s, while the account on Dee's earlier travels in Western Europe remain somewhat disappointingly sketchy. There are other aspects, however, that are treated with great care and which are not readily available to average intellectual historians interested in Dee. Such are the Marian and Elizabethan historical contexts, the story of Dee's cooperation in the North-West Passage explorations, and the account and comparison of how European astronomers and humanists – including Tycho Brahe – reacted to the comet of 1572. Woolley's biography is characterized by a circumspect and precise use of sources, which makes it a reliable historical monograph. What is more (although this will be of less interest to those specifically interested in the mysteries of occult philosophy), it provides an engaging and enjoyable introduction for those who are to begin their studies in John Dee and early modern magic.

As my review has hopefully demonstrated, intellectual historians and scholars of Renaissance esotericism are now in a position to add a substantial segment to their Dee-bookshelf.

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